

Natural Resources

Tree nursery still branching out

By CURT ARENS

If you plant conservation trees on your land, most likely they were grown close to home, at the Charles E. Bessey Tree Nursery, located at the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey.

President Theodore Roosevelt took quite a gamble back in 1902, proclaiming federal forest reserves on 200,000 acres of treeless Nebraska Sandhills. A small group of enthusiastic advocates, including University of Nebraska botanist Charles E. Bessey, convinced Roosevelt that a hand-planted forest on the prairie would provide needed timber resources for a growing nation, and allow scientists to conduct experimental tree planting and



IRRIGATING THE FIELDS: In mid-June, irrigation is used to water seed plantings that will grow into the bareroot seedlings distributed widely through Nebraska NRDs and in surrounding states.



BESSEY NURSERY: The USFS Bessey Tree Nursery near Halsey was founded in 1902.

construct a forest, perhaps positively influencing the local climate. It was environmental engineering on a grand scale.

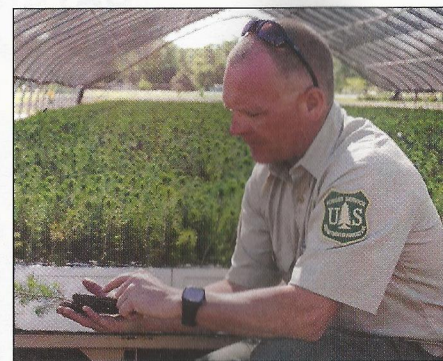
Nebraska's new forest reserves seemed the perfect place for a tree production facility to secure seed and raise seedlings near where the human-made, technological forest would take root. Eighty acres of flat flood plain along the Middle Loup River was fenced off for the new nursery. By the fall of 1902, seed collection took place in the Pine Ridge of Nebraska and the Black Hills. The first seed was sown at the nursery site in November. By the following April, tens of thousands of new seedlings were planted, including jack pine, yellow pine, red cedar and blue spruce. Charles A. Scott, who served as the first Nebraska National Forest supervisor, reported that early results were discouraging. But those early setbacks were short-lived.

With the Kinkaid Act of 1904, followed

by the Clarke-McNary Act in 1924, the importance of Bessey Nursery grew. The nursery provided needed tree seedlings not only to the new national forest in the state, but also to new "Kinkaiders" Sandhills homesteaders. Through Clarke-McNary, USFS was authorized to work with designated state agencies to distribute seedlings to private landowners for windbreak and shelterbelt plantings.

Today, Bessey Nursery manager Richard Gilbert understands the legacy he is carrying on at the nation's oldest continuously operated federal tree nursery. "The nursery has been producing plants since 1902 to help protect our natural resources, cropland, livestock, wildlife, and ranch and farm homes," Gilbert says. "It is an honor to carry on the tradition and vision of Charles E. Bessey."

The nursery raises between 1.3 million and 1.5 million bareroot trees on 46 irrigated acres, mostly for conservation plantings that are shipped to Natural Resources Districts in Nebraska, as well as for private and public windbreak, wildlife and shelterbelt planting efforts in Kansas, Colorado, South Dakota, North Dakota and Wyoming. Of the bareroot trees, Gilbert says that Eastern red cedar, Rocky Mountain juniper, ponderosa pine, American plum and chokecherry are top sellers. Bessey also grows about 1 million container trees annually, including ponderosa and lodgepole pines, Douglas fir and Engelmann spruce. These trees, raised in five green-



BIG OPERATION: Nursery manager Richard Gilbert oversees operations at the nation's oldest continuously operated federal tree nursery near Halsey.

houses covering 17,000 square feet, go to reforestation efforts in U.S. Forest Service districts in Colorado, Wyoming and South Dakota, as well as about 40,000 trees to burn areas near Chadron in the Pine Ridge Ranger District.

Elevation and location are everything when collecting seed for the comprehensive Bessey seed bank. "All plants planted on a Ranger District must be native to that location," Gilbert says. "Bessey Nursery is the Region 2 seed bank, and we store about 13,000 pounds of conifer seed, or right around 750 seed lots."

For Gilbert, the mission of the nursery is caring for the land and serving people. "We fill a niche with the plants we produce, whether it is for the Plains, Rocky Mountains, windbreaks, riparian areas or for wildlife plantings," he says.

Contact Gilbert at 308-533-2257, ext. 8117. You can order conservation trees by contacting your local NRD office.